

Education

The WASL

Providing our children with quality education is our greatest priority as a state. The state has dedicated a lot of money and resources to our K-12 public schools. Taxpayers spend more than \$8000 per student per school year.

In 1993, the Legislature created the WASL test, which contains three subject areas: math, reading, and writing. The Class of 2008 will be the first class required to pass all three sections to graduate. Students have four opportunities to retake the test and three alternatives to meet the WASL requirement if they do not pass the test. These alternatives were approved last session.

Of these three subject areas, math remains a problem area. Last spring, 49 percent of 10th graders taking the math test failed this section. This was a concern for students, teachers and parents.

Last fall, the governor proposed that the Legislature look into delaying the math requirement for the classes of 2008, 2009 and 2010. If the Legislature agrees to this, we will also have to determine what will be an acceptable temporary

alternative. It is important for us to maintain rigorous standards in our schools, but be open to making adjustments when needed.

Local Ties

Locally, history and civics teacher Dan Oster of Barker High School in the Spokane Valley was selected to be one of 24 Washington state teachers to participate in the Legislative Scholar Program hosted by the Washington Legislature.

Oster, who has taught at Barker High for seven years, came to Olympia in July for a two-day program to listen to speakers and participate in workshops about the state Legislature and tools to teach about state government.

Kudos to Dan for being selected to this program! It speaks to his dedication to student learning. What a remarkable resource this will be for Barker High.



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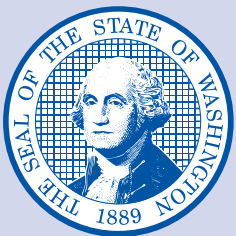
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Bob McCaslin
Washington State Senator • 4th Legislative District

January 2007

Dear Neighbors:

I hope you enjoyed a wonderful holiday season and a happy New Year's. Each new year marks new beginnings, and in the state Senate we'll be met with new changes of our own.

When the legislative session begins on Jan. 8, the Senate will greet new members, two new committees and as always, new challenges. Before I make my way over to Olympia for the 2007 legislative session, I want to highlight what I think some of these challenges will be.

First, 2007 is the start of a new biennium, which means the Legislature will be considering a new state budget. As you may know, our budget is written on a two-year cycle, and this year the Legislature will consider a state budget for 2007-2009. In writing this budget, we have many issues and priorities to consider.

In education, you may be familiar with or have children taking the Washington Assessment of Student Learning, or WASL. With the Class of 2008 and successive classes required to pass all subjects in the WASL to graduate, the Legislature will no doubt be looking to see where we stand, and whether we should postpone some of the requirements – especially given the fact that nearly half of last year's 10th graders did not pass the math portion of the WASL.

You'll also find information in this newsletter about property taxes and our property rights. Some of you may have heard that Spokane County voted to increase property taxes. It's important to understand how these increases relate to what is going on at the state level and what we can do about it. This issue is particularly important to our seniors who are on fixed incomes and are hit particularly hard by these continuing increases.

As always, it is an honor to represent you. I welcome you to contact me directly via e-mail or phone with any questions or concerns you may have.

Sincerely,

Bob McCaslin

Bob McCaslin
State Senator
4th District

The Budget

Last biennium our state budget was \$27.3 billion. Even though that number is much larger than any family’s budget, the basic mechanics of the state budget are similar to your own family’s budget.

When times are good, your family has extra money to spend. When times are not as good, families make adjustments and trim their spending. In doing so, families take into consideration their most important expenses, like housing.

Then there is the spending that may have been committed to in previous years. For instance, when we buy a car, we commit to the payments long after we drive that car off the lot. In many ways, you can apply some of these ideas to the state budget.

The November revenue forecast projected that the state will have \$1.9 billion in reserves. The healthy economic forecast is largely attributed to the growth in housing and construction.

Therefore, times are good in Washington state. We have a surplus. Personal income grew 10.1 percent in 2006. Employment growth has been at a strong 3.2 percent.

The question is this: What are we going to do with these surplus funds? Here are some facts to consider as we set the budget:

- **Nearly 40 percent of the surplus is already committed to be spent.** Even before we received the good news of a surplus, the Legislature last year already committed to spending \$719 million of the current surplus on specific projects.

- **The surplus is a result of mostly one industry** – housing/construction – which many believe is beginning to slow. That means these funds are not a guaranteed source of revenue for coming years.
- **The state carries a huge “past due” bill** in our entitlement programs. For the past two budget cycles, the state has failed to make its required payments to the state pension system.

In my mind, the responsible thing to do is to appropriately fund the state pension system and then put some money away for less fortunate economic times. That is why I have supported and will continue to support the idea of a “rainy day fund.”

A “rainy day fund” would require the state to set aside 1 percent of general state revenue each year into a dedicated account. For the 2007-2009 biennium, that would mean we could sock away about \$250 million.

When our economy faces a downturn and employment growth is less than 1 percent, the fund could be accessed with a simple majority vote in both the House and Senate.

It’s responsible to provide a cushion for the state when it faces difficult economic times. It’s a way to ensure that programs providing assistance to those in need (e.g. children, the elderly and disabled persons) have adequate funding even when we don’t have massive surpluses.

There’s no better time to save than when we have extra funds.

For additional information on Washington state’s budgeting process: www.ofm.wa.gov/reports/budgetprocess.pdf

Property Taxes and Private Property

Growth Management Act

In the early 1990s, the state implemented an unfortunate one-size-fits-all Growth Management Act (GMA). The GMA was supposed to allow local citizens and locally elected officials to plan growth that was appropriate for their community. The GMA was supposed to balance environmental, business and private property interests and slow urban sprawl. It was supposed to help with affordable housing.

Instead, what we know and see now is that the GMA has artificially raised home prices, and has made it nearly impossible to purchase a lot. It’s a concern I hear about often from our neighbors, especially those who purchased land years ago with the intention of building a quiet retirement home.

This is because the GMA, with its regulations and urban density requirements, created scarcity in land and drove prices up. The increased prices also drive up the assessed values of existing homes, which in turn, increases property taxes.

Additionally, the GMA’s impact fees, or the fee developers pay upfront to compensate for the “impact” to the community, increase the cost of a home. That is because developers simply pass that fee onto the buyer.

It’s not the developers who are affected, but rather everyday people and families who want to buy a home that bear the brunt of this hefty fee.

For those who want to build their own home, they are especially affected by the GMA’s vague language concerning critical areas. In 1995, the GMA was amended to say that local governments must include best available science (BAS) when adopting critical area ordinance plans and regulations.

Unfortunately, the Legislature did not define either “include” or “best available science.” Pressed by environmental groups and state agency efforts to exploit this uncertainty, some local governments have felt compelled to adopt no-touch buffer setbacks of 200 feet or larger. This excessive protection for critical areas comes at the expense of landowner property rights. These regulations devalue private property and restrict owners’ rights and uses.

What this typically results in is the inability for a long-time landowner to develop a home or addition on his or her own property.

Therefore, whether you are looking to buy or build a home or whether you have long term plans to stay in your current home, you are being affected by the regulations of the GMA.

Everyone is affected by it, but most people do not realize it. Unfortunately, those most affected by it are our seniors and those seeking affordable housing.

By artificially driving home prices up, the GMA creates fewer options for affordable housing, especially in urban areas. In some places, that means people aren’t able to live close to where they work.

Many problems still remain with the GMA, and none of the recent legislative changes truly curbed the negative effects of the law.

While significant changes to the GMA seem unlikely at this juncture, I am committed to helping reduce the impact this and increased property taxes have on our seniors.

Therefore **I plan to introduce legislation that would raise the income threshold for property tax exemptions for senior citizens and disabled persons.**

Right now, property tax exemptions are available for those with an annual income of \$35,000 or less. My bill would raise that amount so more seniors and disabled persons can qualify.

I-747 – Property taxes

It seems like property taxes keep going up. Spokane County has already proposed to increase property taxes.

Unfortunately, the hikes might not stop there. Property taxes have the potential to be increased again, and by a lot.

That’s because a King County Court last June declared that voter-approved Initiative 747 – limiting property taxes increases to 1 percent annually – was unconstitutional.

This is despite the fact that in 2001, 58 percent of Washington voters passed the initiative, including a 65 percent yes vote in our legislative district!

With this ruling, local governments could increase property taxes from 1 percent to 6 percent. Attorney General Rob McKenna appealed the ruling. Until the case is heard, the court has issued a stay on the King County ruling.

I plan to support legislation to reinstate the 1 percent limit that voters clearly support. As I have said, this is critical, especially to our seniors.

Private Property – Public Use

Eminent domain, or the right of government to take private property for public use, came to our attention following a Connecticut case known as the Kelo decision.

In this 2005 decision, the U.S. Supreme Court upheld a lower court ruling that forced property owners to sell their land to city officials to make way for private development. Since then, Washington has been looking at our own property rights laws.

Unfortunately, even though our state constitution is very clear that “private property shall not be taken for private use...,” our state Supreme Court has ruled otherwise.

With the court refusing to act to protect our private property rights, I believe we must make sure state law reinforces what is already in our state constitution. That will give us all some piece of mind that our land won’t be taken away from us.

Several bills were introduced last session to do just that. None were passed, but I believe this is an important enough issue that we need to continue pursuing it.

